

A Concise Glossary of Literary Terms

Note: I expect you to know all these words by the end of the semester. They will be part of the final exam. Begin learning those you do not know now as we need them to discuss what we read.

1. **Action**: what happens in the story.
2. **Allusion**: indirect reference to an event, person, place, or artistic work which the writer assumes the reader knows about; used effectively, the allusion economically links the text to the larger meaning of the other text. When J.D. Salinger alludes to David Copperfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, he assumes the reader knows Dickens's book and will understand the thematic connection.
3. **Analogy**: illustrates the idea by linking it to a more familiar idea to better communicate the idea at hand; typically involves the use of an extended simile--Blake's "Tyger, Tyger" in which the industrial plants are compared to a tiger's appearance and danger.
4. **Antagonist**: the most prominent of a story's characters who opposes the hero (see Protagonist) in the story; in *Lord of the Flies* the antagonist is Jack who embodies evil and seeks to kill Ralph.
5. **Autobiography**: personal remembrance in which the writer tells the story of their own life or a particular event during that life (see Memoir). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou exemplifies this genre of writing.
6. **Biography**: book or story written about the life of someone else; one example would be Justin Kaplan's biography of Mark Twain, *Mr. Twain and Mr. Clemens*
7. **Cadence**: occasionally used as a synonym for "rhythm" or for "meter." Relates to the rising and falling, the rhythm of speech; often an important aspect of a poet's style.
8. **Character**: a person in a story who does things or to whom things happen.
9. **Complication**: That part of the plot in which the story grows tense or entangled as a consequence of the conflicts in the story.
10. **Conflict**: refers to the tension that results from two opposing forces within a story. These conflicts are between a person and one of the following: another person, society, nature, their self, their Fate (or God).
11. **Connotation**: the range of further associations that a word or phrase suggests in addition to the primary dictionary meaning (i.e., its denotation). Example: *fair* as Golding uses it in *Lord of the Flies*.
12. **Context**: those parts of the text that precede and follow a passage or event that help to give it meaning; helpful to readers who encounter information they cannot immediately understand.
13. **Convention**: an established practice used by authors of literary works. Involves technique, style, structure, or subject-matter; particularly essential to poetry and literature which depend on such conventions as rhyme or the genre conventions of short stories.
14. **Denotation**: the accepted meaning of a word (i.e., the one that appears in the dictionary)
15. **Dénouement**: the resolution or undoing of the central "problem" or complications of the story.
16. **Dialect**: variation of pronunciation and usage within standard form of speech; typically based on regional, cultural, or social class differences. The best examples are the different dialects used by Mark Twain in *Huck Finn*. Another word for this is *vernacular*.
17. **Dialogue**: conversation carried on between characters in a literary work.
18. **Diction**: the choice of words used in a literary work. The writing can be characterized by such features as archaisms, colloquialisms, profanity, slang, trite expressions, or vulgarity.
19. **Digression**: temporary departure from the main subject to address a separate idea or event within the story.
20. **Dramatic Monologue**: speech in which the poet or character speaks to a silent audience of one or more.
21. **Empathy**: the act of placing yourself "in the shoes" of another and forcing yourself to imagine how that person thinks and feels.
22. **Epic**: long narrative poem or story that tells of the deeds and adventures of a hero. See *Beowulf* or *the Odyssey*.
23. **Epigraph**: short poem or verse placed at the beginning of a book which bears some relation to the book's themes or subject.
24. **Epilogue**: concluding section of a literary work. (see Prologue)
25. **Episodic**: a narrative constructed around a series of distinct but related incidents, the parts of which constitute the whole.
26. **Essay**: a short written composition in prose that examines a particular subject in depth. There are various "rhetorical modes" for the essay: analytical, reflective, cause-effect, narrative, persuasion, classification, comparison/contrast, definition, description.
27. **Exposition**: Background information that establishes the setting and describes the situation in which the main character finds themselves.
28. **Falling Action**: the movement within the story that signals the beginning of trouble or complications for the story or its protagonist. One example would be the point at which Macbeth and his wife commit their first murder.
29. **Fiction**: stories which have been created from the writer's imagination or were invented. Novels and short stories are fiction. As novelist Tim O'Brien says, however, just because it didn't happen doesn't mean it isn't true. (see O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*).
30. **Flashback**: A character in the present thinks back to a time in the past. Such information helps the reader understand why a character thinks or acts as they do in the present context.
31. **Foreshadowing**: early on in the story the author gives hints of what will come later in the story.
32. **Free Verse**: does not conform to the traditional rules that govern metrical verse; there is no regular meter or rhyme. Such poets as use free verse demand that their reader attend to other aspects of the text such as cadence and imagery. Walt Whitman's poetry exemplifies this form.

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33. **Genre**: refers to a type of literature specific to its style, form, or content. Examples include mystery novels, epic poems, tragic plays.
34. **Hyperbole**: exaggeration or overstatement of the truth. Holden Caulfield constantly uses this when he describes his own behavior (e.g., lying).
35. **Irony**: the writer uses a word or phrase to mean the opposite of its literal or normal meaning. There are three forms of irony commonly used: dramatic irony, verbal irony, and situational irony.
36. **Metaphor**: a comparison of two unlike things in which no word of comparison (*like* or *as*) is used. "The river of life...."
37. **Memoir**: an historical account written from the perspective of personal knowledge (e.g., *Growing Up in California: A Memoir*)
38. **Mood**: relates to the feeling a text arouses in its reader; can shift between scenes but tends to define a work overall (e.g., the mood of *Macbeth* is ominous or heavy).
39. **Motif**: a frequently recurring theme or idea in a work of literature. In Amy Tan's *Kitchen God's Wife*, the motif of secrecy runs throughout the story.
40. **Narrator**: the person who tells the story; related to this idea is the extent to which the narrator is "reliable." Also, some narrators know more than others depending on the limits the author has imposed on them; for example, some know only what they "see," while others are privy to every thought and emotion of their character.
41. **Parable**: a short story that illustrates a particular belief or moral; Franz Kafka was particularly interested in the use of parables (see *The Castle*).
42. **Parody**: form of literature that mocks a literary work or its style.
43. **Personification**: a literary device which describes an animal, object, or idea as if it had human characteristics. "The trees reached toward the sky...." Heavily used in poetry but common to fiction, also.
44. **Plot**: it is the "what" of the story: what happens or the action. The plot traditionally contains five elements: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.
45. **Point of View**: Point of view is the vantage point from which a story is told. First-person stories use *I* and *we*, and are told by a character in the story. Third-person stories use pronouns like *he*, *she*, and *they*. This point of view is often limited to the thoughts of one character, the protagonist, though there are exceptions.
46. **Prologue**: the introductory segment of a play or speech.
47. **Prose**: writing that is not composed according to rules and forms that govern poetry.
48. **Protagonist**: the main character or hero of a story. (see Antagonist)
49. **Pun**: word or phrase used in such a way as to imply other possible meanings. Students cannot "get" Shakespeare, for example, if they do not understand and cannot recognize a pun.
50. **Resolution**: The story's central problem is finally solved, leaving the reader with a sense of completion, though the main character may not feel the same way.
51. **Rhetoric**: the deliberate use of eloquence to persuade others' feelings and thoughts; the rhetorical elements of a text refer to those aspects of the story that persuade or otherwise guide the response of the readers.
52. **Rhythm**: the way in which sound is used in a poem; can be used in an ordered or free manner to create a tone and shape to the text.
53. **Rising action**: Characters face or try to solve a problem. This results in conflicts within themselves or with others; these conflicts grow more intense and complicated as the story unfolds.
54. **Satire**: used to make fun of or ridicule a human vice or weakness or individual failings; classic example is found in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* which satirizes politics and human nature.
55. **Setting**: The time and place in which a story occurs. It also includes details about the atmosphere or historical period in which the story takes place.
56. **Stanza**: from the Italian word for *room*, the word refers to the number of lines a poetic "paragraph" contains: couplet (two line stanza), triplet, quatrain (four-line stanza), quintet, sestet, septet (seven-line stanza), and octave.
57. **Stereotype**: a character is merely a stereotype when they have no individuality to distinguish them from, for example, historical conceptions of their group. Thus Shylock in *Merchant of Venice* or Jim in *Huck Finn* are sometimes considered little more than stereotypes if not read carefully.
58. **Simile**: compares two unlike things using *as* or *like*. "She stood in front of the altar, shaking like a freshly caught trout." (Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.)
59. **Structure**: has to do with the form or organization of the text, particular as it relates to or affects the meaning or action within the story. What purpose is served, for example, by the constant back-and-forth-in-time structure of Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine?*
60. **Style** refers to how a writer uses language and literary devices to express ideas and create characters. Style includes word choice and sentence structure; it also consists of devices such as metaphor, repetition, and imagery.
61. **Symbol**: person, place, thing that is, in a text, used to represent something else. As Flannery O'Connor says, however, in *Mystery and Manners*, such symbols must first function as intended (e.g., a wooden leg in one of her stories) before it can convey a deeper symbolic truth (e.g., about her character's dependence).
62. **Synopsis**: a short summary or précis of a story's plot or themes.
63. **Theme**: Conveys the author's ideas about life. Themes can be obvious but sometimes require closer reading. Stories, especially novels, typically have more than one theme, though there is only one main theme in most stories.
64. **Tone**: similar to Mood, it relates to the overall feeling a story creates in the reader.
65. **Tragedy**: an outcome which the character could have avoided at any point along the way but, due to certain flaws, chose not to; these errors in judgment lead to their inevitable fall. See Shakespeare.